Globalization of culture  
Manfred Steger (2013)

Cultural globalization refers to the intensification and expansion of cultural flows across the globe. Obviously, ‘culture’ is a very broad concept; it is frequently used to describe the whole of human experience. In order to avoid the ensuing problem of overgeneralization, it is important to make analytical distinctions between aspects of social life. For example, we associate the adjective ‘economic’ with the production, exchange, and consumption of commodities. If we are discussing the ‘political’, we mean practices related to the generation and distribution of power in societies. If we are talking about the ‘cultural’, we are concerned with the symbolic construction, articulation, and dissemination of meaning. Given that language, music, and images constitute the major forms of symbolic expression, they assume special significance in the sphere of culture.

The exploding network of cultural interconnections and interdependencies in the last decades has led some commentators to suggest that cultural practices lie at the very heart of contemporary globalization. Yet, cultural globalization did not start with the worldwide dissemination of rock ‘n’ roll, Coca-Cola, or football. Expansive civilizational exchanges are much older than modernity. Still, the volume and extent of cultural transmissions in the contemporary period have far exceeded those of earlier eras. Facilitated by the Internet and our proliferating mobile digital devices, the dominant symbolic systems of meaning of our age—such as individualism, consumerism, and various religious discourses—circulate more freely and widely than ever before.

As images and ideas can be more easily and rapidly transmitted from one place to another, they profoundly impact the way people experience their everyday lives. Today, cultural practices have escaped fixed localities such as town and nation, eventually acquiring new meanings in interaction with dominant global themes.

The thematic landscape traversed by scholars of cultural globalization is vast and the questions they raise are too numerous to be fleshed out in this short introduction. Rather than offering a long laundry list of relevant topics, this section will focus on three important themes: the tension between sameness and difference in the emerging global culture; the crucial role of transnational media corporations in disseminating popular culture; and the globalization of languages.

Global culture: sameness or difference?

Does globalization make people around the world more alike or more different? This is the question most frequently raised in discussions on the subject of cultural globalization. A group of commentators we might call ‘pessimistic’ hyperglobalizers argue in favor of the former. They suggest that we are not moving towards a cultural rainbow that reflects the diversity of the world’s existing cultures. Rather, we are witnessing the rise of an increasingly homogenized popular culture underwritten by a Western ‘culture industry’ based in New York, Hollywood, London, and Milan. As evidence for their interpretation, these commentators point to Amazonian Indians wearing Nike training shoes; denizens of the Southern Sahara purchasing Yankees baseball caps; and Palestinian youths proudly displaying their Chicago Bulls sweatshirts in downtown Ramallah. Referring to the diffusion of Anglo-American values and consumer goods as the ‘Americanization of the world’, the proponents of this cultural homogenization thesis argue that Western norms and lifestyles are overwhelming more vulnerable cultures. Although there have been serious attempts by some countries to resist these forces of ‘cultural imperialism’—for example, a ban on satellite dishes in Iran, and the French imposition of tariffs and quotas on imported film and television—the spread of American popular culture seems to be unstoppable.

But these manifestations of sameness are also evident inside the dominant countries of the global North. American sociologist George Ritzer coined the term ‘McDonaldization’ to describe the wide-ranging sociocultural processes by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world. On the surface, these principles appear to
be rational in their attempts to offer efficient and predictable ways of serving people’s needs. However, looking behind the façade of repetitive TV commercials that claim to ‘love to see you smile’, we can identify a number of serious problems. For one, the generally low nutritional value of fast-food meals—and particularly their high fat content—has been implicated in the rise of serious health problems such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and juvenile obesity. Moreover, the impersonal, routine operations of ‘rational’ fast-service establishments actually undermine expressions of forms of cultural diversity. In the long run, the McDonaldization of the world amounts to the imposition of uniform standards that eclipse human creativity and dehumanize social relations.

The current era of globalization, with its unprecedented acceleration and intensification in the global flows of capital, labor, and information, is having a homogenizing influence on local culture. While this phenomenon promotes the integration of societies and has provided millions of people with new opportunities, it may also bring with it a loss of uniqueness of local culture, which in turn can lead to loss of identity, exclusion and even conflict. This is especially true for traditional societies and communities, which are exposed to rapid ‘modernization’ based on models imported from outside and not adapted to their context. (UNESCO, 2017)

One particular thoughtful analyst in this group of pessimistic hyperglobalizers is American political theorist Benjamin Barber. In his popular book Consumed (2007), he warns his readers against an ‘ethos of infantilization’ that sustains global capitalism, turning adults into children through dumbed down advertising and consumer goods while also targeting children as consumers. This ethos is premised on the recognition that there is not an endless market for consumerist goods as was once thought. Global inequality contributes to stifling the growth of markets and of capitalism. In order to expand markets and make a profit, global capitalists are developing homogenous global products targeting the young and wealthy throughout the world, as well as turning children into consumers. Thus, global consumerism becomes increasingly soulless and unethical in its pursuit of profit.

Optimistic hyperglobalizers agree with their pessimistic colleagues that cultural globalization generates more sameness, but they consider this outcome to be a good thing. For example, American social theorist Francis Fukuyama explicitly welcomes the global spread of Anglo-American values and lifestyles, equating the Americanization of the world with the expansion of democracy and free markets. But optimistic hyperglobalizers do not just come in the form of American chauvinists who apply the old theme of manifest destiny to the global arena. Some representatives of this camp consider themselves staunch cosmopolitans who celebrate the Internet as the harbinger of a homogenized ‘technoculture’. Others are free-market enthusiasts who embrace the values of global consumer capitalism.

It is one thing to acknowledge the existence of powerful homogenizing tendencies in the world, but it is quite another to assert that the cultural diversity existing on our planet is destined to vanish. In fact, several influential commentators offer a contrary assessment that links globalization to new forms of cultural expression. Sociologist Roland Robertson, for example, contends that global cultural flows often reinvigorate local cultural niches. Hence, rather than being totally obliterated by the Western consumerist forces of sameness, local difference and particularity still play an important role in creating unique cultural constellations. Arguing that cultural globalization always takes place in local contexts, Robertson rejects the cultural homogenization thesis and speaks instead of glocalization—a complex interaction of the global and local characterized by cultural borrowing. The resulting expressions of cultural ‘hybridity’ cannot be reduced to clear-cut manifestations of ‘sameness’ or ‘difference’. Such processes of hybridization have become most visible in fashion, music, dance, film, food, and language.

But the respective arguments of hyperglobalizers and skeptics are not necessarily incompatible. The contemporary experience of living and acting across cultural borders means both the loss of traditional meanings and the creation of new symbolic expressions. Reconstructed feelings of belonging coexist in uneasy tension with a sense of placelessness. Indeed, some commentators have argued that modernity is slowly giving way to a new ‘postmodern’ framework characterized by a less stable sense of identity and knowledge.
Given the complexity of global cultural flows, one would actually expect to see uneven and contradictory effects. In certain contexts, these flows might change traditional manifestations of national identity in the direction of a popular culture characterized by sameness; in others they might foster new expressions of cultural particularism; in still others they might encourage forms of cultural ‘hybridity’. Those commentators who summarily denounce the homogenizing effects of Americanization must not forget that hardly any society in the world today possesses an ‘authentic’, self-contained culture. Those who despair at the flourishing of cultural hybridity ought to listen to exciting Bollywood pop songs, admire the intricacy of several variations of Hawaiian pidgin, or enjoy the culinary delights of Cuban-Chinese cuisine. Finally, those who applaud the spread of consumerist capitalism need to pay attention to its negative consequences, such as the dramatic decline of traditional communal sentiments as well as the commodification of society and nature.

**The role of the media**

To a large extent, the global cultural flows of our time are generated and directed by global media empires that rely on powerful communication technologies to spread their message. Saturating global cultural reality with formulaic TV shows and mindless advertisements, these corporations increasingly shape people’s identities and the structure of desires around the world. The rise of the global imaginary is inextricably connected to the rise of the global media. During the last two decades, a small group of very large TNCs have come to dominate the global market for entertainment, news, television, and film. In 2006, only eight media conglomerates—Yahoo, Google, AOL/Time Warner, Microsoft, Viacom, General Electric, Disney, and News Corporation—accounted for more than two-thirds of the US$250–275 billion in annual worldwide revenues generated by the communications industry. In the first half of that year, the volume of merger deals in global media, Internet, and telecommunications totaled US$300 billion, three times the figure for the first six months of 1999.

As recently as fifteen years ago, not one of the giant corporations that dominate what Benjamin Barber has appropriately called the ‘infotainment telesector’ existed in its present form as a media company. In 2001, nearly all of these corporations ranked among the largest 300 non-financial firms in the world. Today, most media analysts concede that the emergence of a global commercial-media market amounts to the creation of a global oligopoly similar to that of the oil and automotive industries in the early part of the 20th century. The crucial cultural innovators of earlier decades—small, independent record labels, radio stations, movie theatres, newspapers, and book publishers—have become virtually extinct as they found themselves incapable of competing with the media giants.

The commercial values disseminated by transnational media enterprises secure not only the undisputed cultural hegemony of popular culture, but also lead to the depoliticization of social reality and the weakening of civic bonds. One of the most glaring developments of the last two decades has been the transformation of news broadcasts and educational programs into shallow entertainment shows—many of them ironically touted as ‘reality’ shows. Given that news is less than half as profitable as entertainment, media firms are increasingly tempted to pursue higher profits by ignoring journalism’s much vaunted separation of newsroom practices and business decisions. Partnerships and alliances between news and entertainment companies are fast becoming the norm, making it more common for publishing executives to press journalists to cooperate with their newspapers’ business operations. A sustained attack on the professional autonomy of journalism is, therefore, also is part of cultural globalization.

**The globalization of languages**

One direct method of measuring and evaluating cultural changes brought about by globalization is to study the shifting global patterns of language use. The globalization of languages can be viewed as a process by which some languages are increasingly used in international communication while others lose their prominence and even disappear for lack of speakers. Researchers at the Globalization Research Center at the University of Hawai’i have identified five key variables that influence the globalization of languages:
1. Number of languages: The declining number of languages in different parts of the world points to the strengthening of homogenizing cultural forces.
2. Movements of people: People carry their languages with them when they migrate and travel. Migration patterns affect the spread of languages.
3. Foreign language learning and tourism: Foreign language learning and tourism facilitate the spread of languages beyond national or cultural boundaries.
4. Internet languages: The Internet has become a global medium for instant communication and quick access to information. Language use on the Internet is a key factor in the analysis of the dominance and variety of languages in international communication.
5. International scientific publications: International scientific publications contain the languages of global intellectual discourse, thus critically impacting intellectual communities involved in the production, reproduction, and circulation of knowledge around the world.

Given these highly complex interactions, research in this area frequently yields contradictory conclusions. The figure above represents only one possible conceptualization of the meaning and effects of language globalization. Unable to reach a general agreement, experts in the field have developed several different hypotheses. One model posits a clear correlation between the growing global significance of a few languages—particularly English, Chinese, and Spanish—and the declining number of other languages around the world. Another model suggests that the globalization of language does not necessarily mean that our descendants are destined to utilize only a few tongues. Still another thesis emphasizes the power of the Anglo-American culture industry to make English—or what some commentators call ‘Globish’—the global lingua franca of the 21st century.

To be sure, the rising significance of the English language has a long history, reaching back to the birth of British colonialism in the late 16th century. At that time, only approximately seven million people used English as their mother tongue. By the 1990s, this number had swollen to over 350 million native speakers, with 400 million more using English as a second language. Today, more than 80 per cent of the content posted on the Internet is in English. Almost half of the world’s growing population of foreign students is enrolled at institutions in Anglo-American countries.

At the same time, however, the number of spoken languages in the world has dropped from about 14,500 in 1500 to less than 6,500 in 2012. Given the current rate of decline, some linguists predict that 50–90 per cent of the currently existing languages will have disappeared by the end of the 21st century. But the world’s languages are not the only entities threatened with extinction. The spread of consumerist values and materialist lifestyles has endangered the ecological health of our planet as well.

**The globalization of music: The Philippine Experience**

(Excerpt from, Richard Letts, 2003, The Effects of Globalization on Music in Five Contrasting Countries: Australia, Germany, Nigeria, the Philippines and Uruguay)

**Structure of musical life.** The history of musical life in the Philippines evolves from pre-historic forms associated with animistic rituals which persist still in some rural areas. Indigenous groups each have their own set of chanted epics. Indigenous song is known for its melismatic [several notes sung to one syllable of text] qualities. Traditional musicians still use indigenous instruments, which vary greatly from region to region depending upon materials commonly available and on surrounding cultural influences which include trade contacts with India, China and Indonesia.

Philippine music began to assimilate Western liturgical and secular traditions from the time of Magellan’s landing in 1521. Spanish melodies and Christian images and lyrics were integrated into the indigenous concepts of worship. Folk songs and lullabies, likewise, became a hybrid wherein the lyrics were of indigenous origin while the melodies were that of the Western syllabic style of one note per syllable.

After the Spanish-American War of 1898 came the introduction of Anglo-American forms of music, and in
due course the radio, jukebox, and phonograph. Around this time, many academic institutions and music conservatories in the country started to operate producing virtuosos in European styled classical compositions. During the early stages of the 20th Century, trends in music were patterned to that of the American stream. The birth of jazz was almost simultaneous between the two countries; in its day, it dominated the lounges and cabarets in the cities. But despite the American presence, remnants of the Spanish traditions still flourished as exemplified in e.g. the zarzuelas.

The advent of the recording industry and commercial popular music saw the further preservation of Kundiman and folk ethnic songs, along with jazz and ballroom music. Villar Records was established in 1950 and released Kundiman and folk song albums interpreted by popular singers and bands, and Visayan songs with Cebuano lyrics. Visayan music produced a recording industry parallel to that of the mainstream operation in the capital city.

The global revolution in the global music industry in the late 50s, with rock and roll, saw birth of a Filipino variant, Pinoy Rock. This was followed through in the 1960s and the 1970s by the Philippine music industry with music patterned after the mainstream music of the west such as jazz, rock, and pop rock, but containing sounds that are distinctly Filipino, thus, coined the terms “Pinoy rock”, “Pinoy jazz”, and the “Manila sound.”

Performances. Local possibilities are of concert engagements, appearances in radio/film/television shows and special events, and commercial product endorsement. Internationally, possibilities include international concert series and overseas job placement for long-term music engagements. Artists use the services of talent managers and/or job placement agencies, which charge service fees and commissions from either the talent or the employer or both. International arrangements are government-regulated.

Professional and Industry Organizations. There is an extensive array of organizations established to foster professionalism and promote sectoral interests. They include organizations for the recording industry, royalty collections, broadcasters, composers, musicians, singers, and an anti-piracy coalition. Others exist to support diverse sub-disciplines of music such as music teachers, bamboo music enthusiasts, orchestras, choirs, bands etc.

There are thousands of instrument based groups (rondallas), choirs and popular bands, professional and amateur, based in schools and communities.

There are many problems facing musicians and composers. Among them: absence of standardized compensation and wages for various categories of artists; absence of health and life insurance and other benefits owing to non-classification of music as a regular profession; prohibitive cost of musical instruments and accessories; lack of suitable venues for music performances; lack of local job opportunities for music artists; absence of a monitoring agency for use of local music for commercial purposes resulting in violation of intellectual property rights; and misrepresentation and/or misappropriation of indigenous music materials for contemporary performances.

Recording industry. There are 39 companies affiliated with the Philippine Association of Recording Companies (PARI) and another dozen or so small companies who refuse to join because of a perception of shady dealings by some PARI members. The only data are collected by PARI from its members, only 60-80% of whom respond. These show peak sales of 11.8m units in 1997, declining to 6.7m in 2002. No figure has been offered showing market share by local artists. It seems that international pop dominates but there are strong Filipino variants that would account for much of the recording activity by Filipino musicians. Piracy is rampant, conducted by shadowy foreign organizations as well as locals. It has hardly been slowed by a vigorous campaign from PARI. New legislation has been introduced but has yet to take effect.

Mass media music from the west held a 60% market share in 1996, and much of the locally generated 35% was music imitative of or derived from the international Top 40.
Filipino labels and musicians begin to have a presence on the internet through websites and online distribution and sales. Record piracy, some of it internationally controlled, has entered the market in a big way and local companies are suffering.

Broadcasting and local content quotas. While obviously music is an element of television broadcasts, radio is the principal medium for broadcasting music as the primary focus of attention.

The current requirement is that all radio stations with a music format should play a minimum of 4 original Filipino compositions per clock hour (Executive Order No. 255 of 1987). The requirement is ignored and violated because of the lack of monitoring capacity of the National Telecommunications Commission; no prosecution has even been filed. Radio stations prefer foreign materials or their similar-sounding local equivalent. Payola is rampant and works against the interests of local music. Two new bills were filed before the Senate, one proposing to continue the current requirement for radio and adding strong requirements for television and for music in public places, the other proposing a radio quota of 60% of airtime. The first bill would penalize three-time violators with loss of the broadcast license; the second imposes a 20,000 pesos fine for each violation. Of course, the law can be effective only if enforced.

A personal view of music in the Philippines
(Excerpt from Jim Paredes, Music then and now, In Humming in my Universe, The Philippine Star, 2014)

I will share my general thoughts on music as I experienced it growing up and what I think about it in the present. As a family, there was always music in our house. Instead of spending hours of our childhood watching TV as most families did, we spent it around the music player (or the hi-fi set as it was called in the 50s). We had a few vinyl records. They were mostly American hits, folk songs by the Kingston Trio, Belafonte, Disney albums, Broadway musicals, etc. I remember being so captivated by the recorded sound that I played our records over and over until I memorized practically all of them. I can still remember a good part of them to this day.

It was not hard to understand why I asked for a guitar during my early adolescence. By that time, I had discovered the British Pop invasion and the unraveling of the post-Elvis new music in the US. It was all very exciting. I learned every song I could on the guitar and memorized a whole lot of songs. As far as I was concerned, music was the most important thing in the world and my guitar was the way to know and enjoy music. Artists like Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Peter Paul and Mary, Marvin Gaye, Jimmy Web, The Temptations and many of the icons of that era of the 60s through the 70s formed my musical taste. I felt that by learning the songs on guitar, I could learn the songwriting secrets of the best and the brightest musicians of my generation. I learned a lot and in the process and eventually became a songwriter, producer and performer.

The 80s brought in music videos and synthesizers. I noticed that the music world quickly changed. All of a sudden, songs had a visual component. When I first saw music videos, I did not know how to feel about it. Not too long after, I decided I did not like them. I felt then that music with videos left very little to the imagination. It was like force-feeding your audience images to stop them from imagining on their own. It seemed to me as though artists wanted greater control on how their audience should react to their music. I also noticed that because of videos, so much mediocre or even bad music began to ‘look’ good, and some good music actually suffered because of bad videos.

Also, with the advent of synthesizers, musicians did not need to learn the chops to play good music anymore. They could now simply cut and paste music, speed up or slow down their playing, or play a song on one instrument like a keyboard, and hear it played back on another like a guitar. Anyone could do music with synthesizers and anyone could sing with the new voice gadgets. While it is true that the new technology of synthesizers and sequencers democratized music creation, it also ensured the massive proliferation of soul-less mediocrity.
I am not alone in saying that the late 80s and 90s music did not seem to have the same level of quality that 70s music had. There was a general sameness in much of the music being created. There was a deficit in imagination. Most of the music was ‘blah’ compared to the glorious 70s. And to me, it did not really get better in the new millennium. Too many people still sound the same. The songs have short, boring hooks that hardly get my attention or interest. More than good melodies and great lyrics, artists now project more hype and attitude than originality and good playing. Many concerts have become primarily visual extravaganzas and mass spectacle rather than exciting, original musical experiences.

Unlike in the 70s, there seem to be very few ‘organic’ artists and music makers coming up these days. When I say ‘organic,’ I am talking about artists who are completely original like Dylan, The Beatles, Joni Mitchell, Michael Jackson and the like who introduced listeners to new, greater experiences of what music could be. They spoke in innovative and clear voices. They thrilled, enthralled, inspired, influenced, shaped and challenged their generation. They were musical giants compared to much of today’s popular artists who merely titillate, amuse and shock mostly through banality and spectacle. I am not even sure if the music industry today could recognize or be interested in an organic artist if they saw one.

I must confess there are only a few artists I enjoy and most of them are not even of the 90s or of the present. Among today’s artists, I would consider David Mathews awesome.

I have been listening for years now to artists from different parts of the world. I love Brazilian and Latin music in general. I have not bought any new CDs that were on the US Top 40 playlist the past two decades. I generally shun ‘commercial’ music. I make no apologies about being a snob. Generally, I search for maverick, unknown acts that have something new to say and have yet to hit mainstream. I have always believed that creators should primarily ask themselves what they want to say first and foremost, and then figure out how they can make their music palatable to their listeners. In today’s world, many artists firstly ask what the market wants, and then mold themselves to fit and cash in on it.

To each his own, I guess.

But I sense the difference between artists who stay on and become icons, and those who are merely ‘flashes in the pan’ lies in the originality and uniqueness of their content.

How does music become universal? For it to become so, the personal, local touch and the truth must shine beyond its intended local audience. What gets people to like something foreign is when the song despite its localized flavor can show a commonality of experience with other nationalities. Koreans are making it in the world as Koreans and even singing in Korean. So did the Brazilians, Jamaicans, Japanese, Africans, Cubans in the past. I am hoping that one day soon, OPM will also come into its own and contribute to the world.

I know young people may not agree with my views. Maybe I am just too old school. I won’t deny that. And I will also admit that despite my earlier comment, I like some music videos that achieve a spectacular marriage of light and sound. Some cynics suggest that perhaps much of rock ’n roll and pop may have run its course and something new must happen. I don’t know.

I just hope that a new vibrant musical era begins again where artists rediscover the power of substance over style, message over attitude, honesty and integrity over excessive commercialism. I like the music world to be run by music creators, songwriters and true lovers of music, not just the music business.